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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on one aspect of a study examining activities, partners, and settings of 20 preschoolers ranging in age from 28 to 45 months. The children were drawn from two cultural communities (both white): in one community parents worked in professional occupations; in the second group, parents were in non-professional, working class occupations. The communities were located in a city in the southeastern United States. Modified spot observations were collected every 6 minutes for 18 hours during 1 week, scheduled to cover an entire waking day of each focal child. Activities occurring during a 30-second window were coded, noting all activities in the vicinity of the focal child, the child's activity, the child's partners (if any) in that activity, and their respective roles. Activities were classified as lessons, work, play, conversation, and other (sleeping, eating, etc.). This paper reports on observations in the lessons category, including academic, interpersonal, skill or nature, and religious lessons. In both communities, lessons were the least common activity. In the group with professional-class parents, children were actively involved in more lessons, particularly academic and skill or nature lessons, and were more likely to play with academic objects (books and games with explicitly academic purposes). In both communities, boys were more likely than girls to engage in academic lessons. Analysis suggests that children from the professional-class community were clearly accustomed to a greater degree of self-direction and initiative. (MM)

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The Lessons They Learn:

Different Experiences of Preschoolers in Two Cultural Contexts

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Introduction

From a Vygotskian perspective, children learn to make sense of their world in the course of the activities in which they engage, particularly with more competent social partners. Cross-cultural scholars have highlighted the fact that the activities in which adults engage and the activities in which they encourage their children to engage differ markedly in different cultural communities. The data presented here indicate that the social worlds inhabited and types of activities engaged in differ quite markedly in two groups from the same society and from the same city. Within-society differences related to factors of income, occupation, and education are unlikely to prove as drastic as those found in cross-cultural studies; nevertheless, they are likely to be significant in the lives of those who experience them.

Goal

Our goal was to examine the activities available to young children, the activities in which they were involved, who initiated the activities themselves and the children's involvement in them, the children's partners (if any).

We selected two small geographically close, relatively homogeneous, racially similar communities in a medium sized city in the southeastern United States. The communities differed in terms of parental socio-economic status (marked by income, education, and occupation). We labelled one community "Holden" and the other "Summit".

All children born 2 1/2-4 years earlier in these communities were identified from birth records, and families still in the communities were contacted. All families who fit our criteria and who wished to participate were included in the study.

Participants

In this paper we focus on the activities, partners, and settings of 20 preschoolers who ranged in age from 28 to 45 months (M = 36.65 months, SD = 1.31). The children were drawn from two cultural communities (both white, one named "Holden" in which parents tend to work in professional occupations and one named "Summit" in which parents tend to work in the non-professional sphere) in a city in the southeastern United States.

Holden Community

The Holden group of children consisted of six girls (M = 38.33 months, SD = 6.62) and five boys (M = 34.4 months, SD = 7.64). Holden parental occupation. Median occupation was 8 on the Hollingshead index ("administrators, lesser professionals"), range 7-9, excluding 6 mothers who stayed at home.

Holden parental income. Minimum median income, $70,000 (range $40,000 to >$85,000).

Holden parental education. Mother's mean years of education post age 14 was 8.1 (SD = 1.9). (Eight years would be equivalent to a bachelor's degree.) Father's mean years of education post age 14 was 8.9 (SD = 1.7).

Summit Community

The Summit group of children consisted of five girls (M = 35.0 months, SD = 3.74), and four boys (M = 39.0 months, SD = 4.56).

Summit parental occupation. Median occupation was 4 on the Hollingshead index ("skilled manual workers"), range 2-5 (one mother stayed at home).

Summit parental income. Minimum median income, $25,000 (range $10,000 to $40,000).

Summit parental education. Mothers' mean years of education post age 14 was 4.9 (SD =

1.5). (Four years would be equivalent to completion of high school.) Fathers' mean years of education post age 14 was 4.6 (SD = 1.6).

Methodology

Families were asked to keep their daily routines unchanged during the observation period. Modified spot observations (Ellis, Rogoff, & Cromer, 1981; Whiting & Edwards, 1988) were collected every six minutes for 18 hours in the course of one week, scheduled to cover an entire waking day of each "focal child" (the focus of observation). Activities occurring during a 30-second "window" were coded, noting all activities going on in the vicinity of the focal child, the child's activity, the child's partners (if any) in that activity, and their respective roles. The activities we were interested in were lessons (4 categories), work (5 categories), play (10 categories), conversation (3 categories), and "other" (6 categories, including sleeping, eating, etc.). In this report, we shall focus on lessons, defined and sub-categorized as follows:

A lesson involves an attempt to impart information or to receive information. Except in the case of interpersonal lessons (see below), a lesson had to have a clear curriculum to be counted.

Academic Lessons - Information that relates to schooling or pre-school skills, such as labelling colors, counting, or helping to read a story. Playing a game with academically related objects (where there is no attempt to impart information) was coded "play with academic object."

Interpersonal Lessons - Information about culturally appropriate behavior, etiquette, values, etc. Examples are getting a child to say "please" or "thank you", commenting on poor eating habits, and not interrupting other people. Simple discipline commands ("stop," "don't do that" etc.) were not coded, but "stop that; it's not polite" when the person speaking was commenting about appropriate etiquette was so coded.

Skill/nature Lessons - Information about the workings of the material or natural world, such as how to tie shoe laces, how to fold clothes, stir cookie batter, and operate a VCR or stereo, or information about the natural world, seasons, time, behavior of animals, etc. Lessons on health and safety were included here.

Religious Lessons - Information on matters of religious or spiritual affairs, or rituals associated with these matters.

Results

A total of 3,584 observations were made of these 20 preschoolers, 1,967 of the Holden community and 1,617 of the Summit community. Because multiple activities were possible, a total of 2,732 activities were recorded as being available for the children of the Holden community (53% of the total), and 2,453 activities were recorded for the children in the Summit community (47%). Because both groups featured one more girl than boy, the proportion of observations on girls was somewhat higher in both communities (55:45).

As can be seen in **Figure 1**, many activities were potentially available to the children, even if the children did not get involved in them. In both Holden and Summit, play was the most common activity occurring around these children. Lessons was the least common activity. Conversations and lessons were more likely to be going on around Holden children, work and play more likely to be going on around the Summit children.

Lessons were available 279 times and the child was involved in 232 of them, either as an active participant or as an observer. As is seen in **Figure 2**, Holden children were actively involved in more lessons than were Summit children, particularly academic and skill/nature lessons. Interpersonal lessons were more evenly distributed. Holden children were far more likely to play with academic objects (looking at books or playing with games and puzzles with explicitly academic purposes). As **Figure 3** shows, boys in both communities were more likely than girls to engage in academic lessons. Summit girls were rarely involved in such lessons. Interpersonal lessons were

the most frequent lessons for Summit children and more frequent for girls than for boys in both groups.

Someone other than the child was likely to initiate the lessons (see **Figure 4**), but the Holden children were more likely to initiate (that is, to ask how something is done or how to spell a word) than the Summit children. Irrespective of who initiated the lesson, **Figure 5** shows that the Holden children were far more likely to involve themselves in it (ask a question or join an ongoing lesson). The Summit children were likely to be involved because someone else ensured that they would--such as telling the child how to behave.

Since families did not vary their routines during the observations and since observation blocks were scattered throughout the day, children were observed in the wide variety of locations they normally frequent. As **Figures 6 & 7** show, Holden and Summit children were observed spending most of their time at home, or in their own yard or car. Summit children spent more time than Holden children in someone else's home (such as at the baby-sitter or at grandparents' house). This difference appears to be at the expense of time at school.

Figure 8 shows where the children were when they were involved in lessons. Holden children had more academic and skill/nature lessons available to them, and more of those lessons were available at home than was true for their Summit counterparts. As seen in **Figure 9**, the most likely social partner for any kind of lesson was the mother. (See "Participants" for information on education level of Holden and Summit mothers.) As in Figures 3 & 4 for lessons in general, **Figures 10 & 11** show that at home Holden children were much more likely than Summit children to initiate lessons and to initiate their involvement in them.

Conclusion

Young children acquire the skills that prepare them for life in their cultural community in the course of engaging in activities that are available to them, often in conjunction with people who are more competent in those activities. This position has been advanced theoretically (Vygotsky, 1978) and supported empirically (e.g., Rogoff, 1990; Whiting & Edwards, 1988).

Socio-cultural comparisons are typically made between Western and non-Western settings, between vastly different societies operating at different levels of technology. However, if culture is "appropriated" or "co-constructed" in the ways described, this process should be reflected in different cultural communities within a single society. In addition, as Bronfenbrenner (1979; Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1983) and others have argued, it is important when dealing with social and cultural variations both within and across societies to move away from "social address" models to "person-process-context" models.

The data presented here indicate that the social worlds inhabited and types of activities engaged in differ quite markedly in two groups from the same society and from the same city. These differences are likely to be significant in the lives of the children who experience them.

Kohn (1977, 1979) has argued that parents from different social classes try to inculcate somewhat different characteristics in their children, and that these differences both stem from and serve to re-create the social class system. He argued that parents whose occupations require initiative and self-direction are likely to value self-direction, self-control, and initiative in their children. By contrast, parents who are more closely supervised by others are likely to value conformity to external authority, obedience, and good behavior on the part of their children. Although Kohn's position has been supported by a wealth of self-report and questionnaire data from parents, there is surprisingly little data on parental behavior (Luster, Rhoades, & Haas, 1989). These data clearly suggest the children from the two communities observed were involved in strikingly different types of activities, and demonstrably different types of lessons. Yet more striking is the fact that, before they are four years of age, Holden children are clearly accustomed to a greater degree of self-direction and initiative than Summit children.

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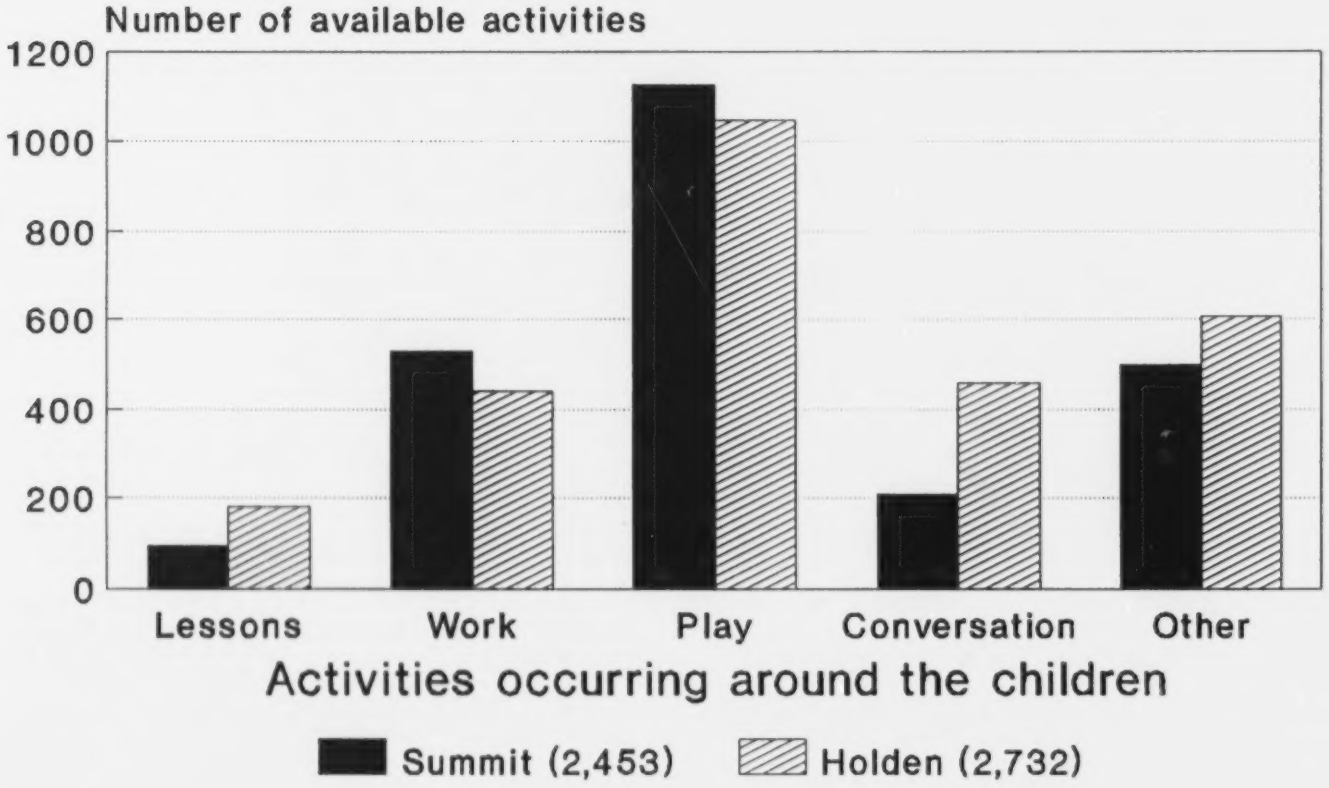
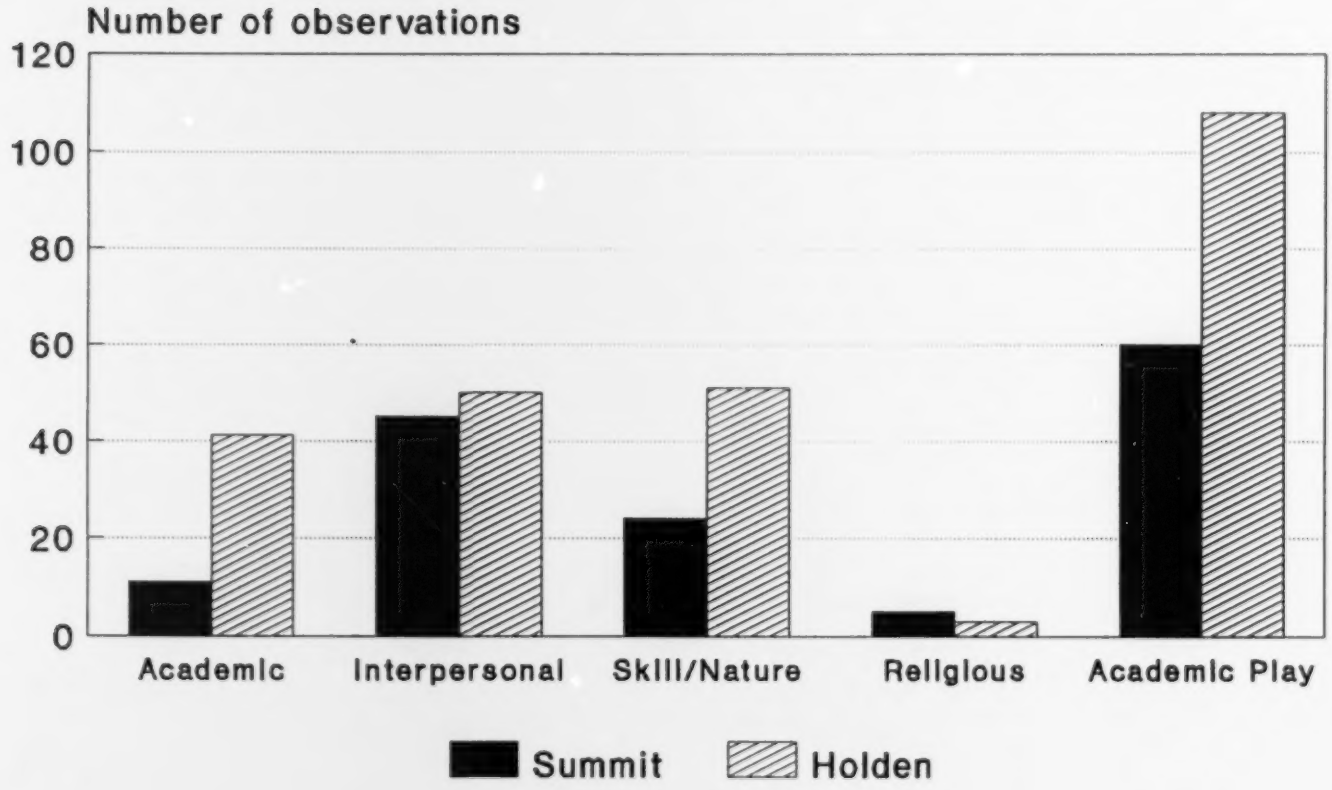
1: Availability of Activities
By Community

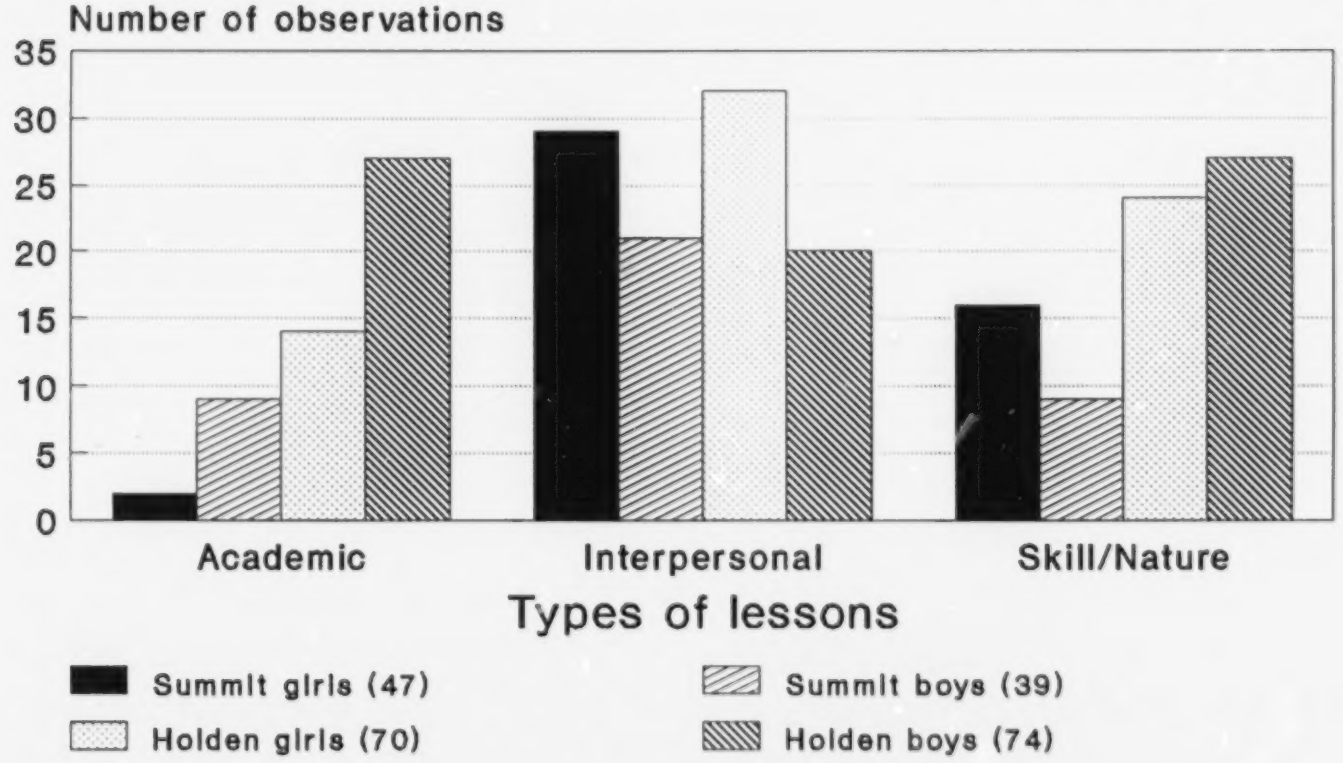


Ns = total activities, by community

2: Lessons and Academic Play
By Community

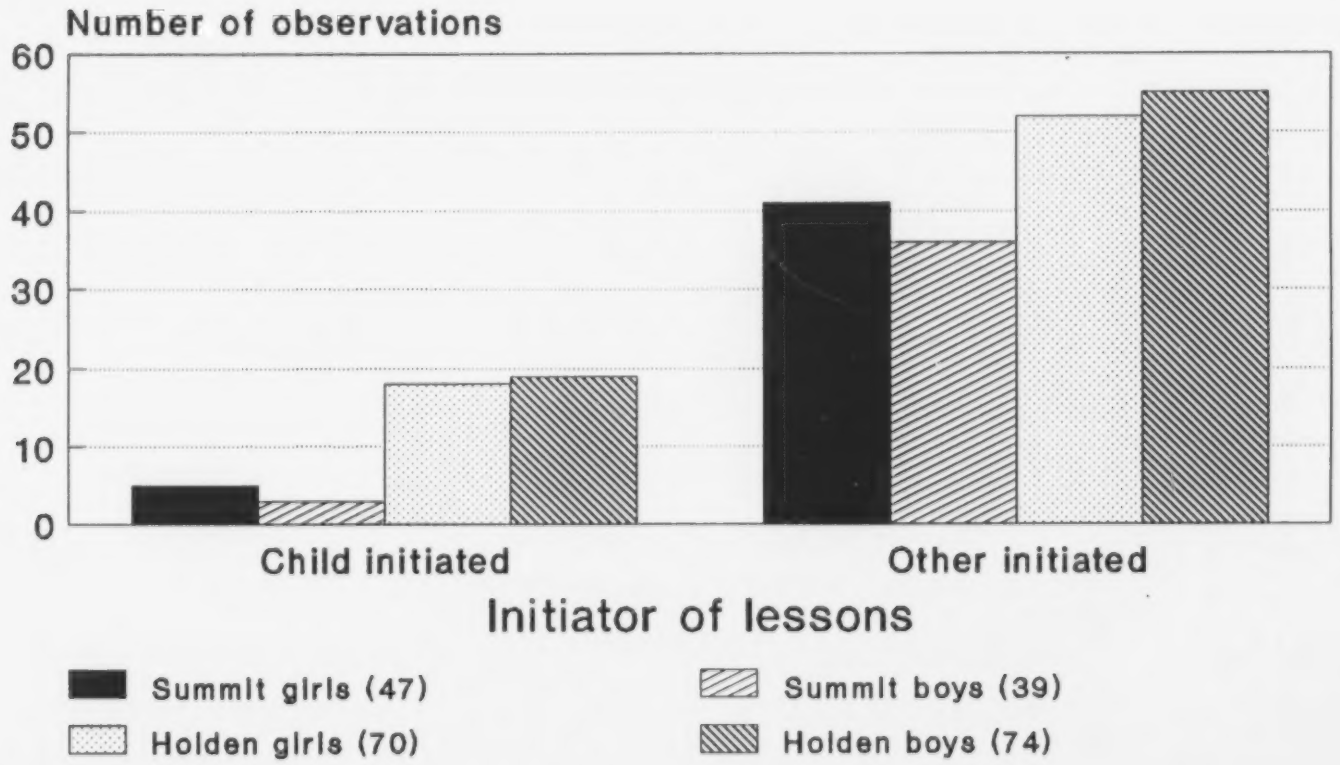


3: Lessons
By Community and Gender



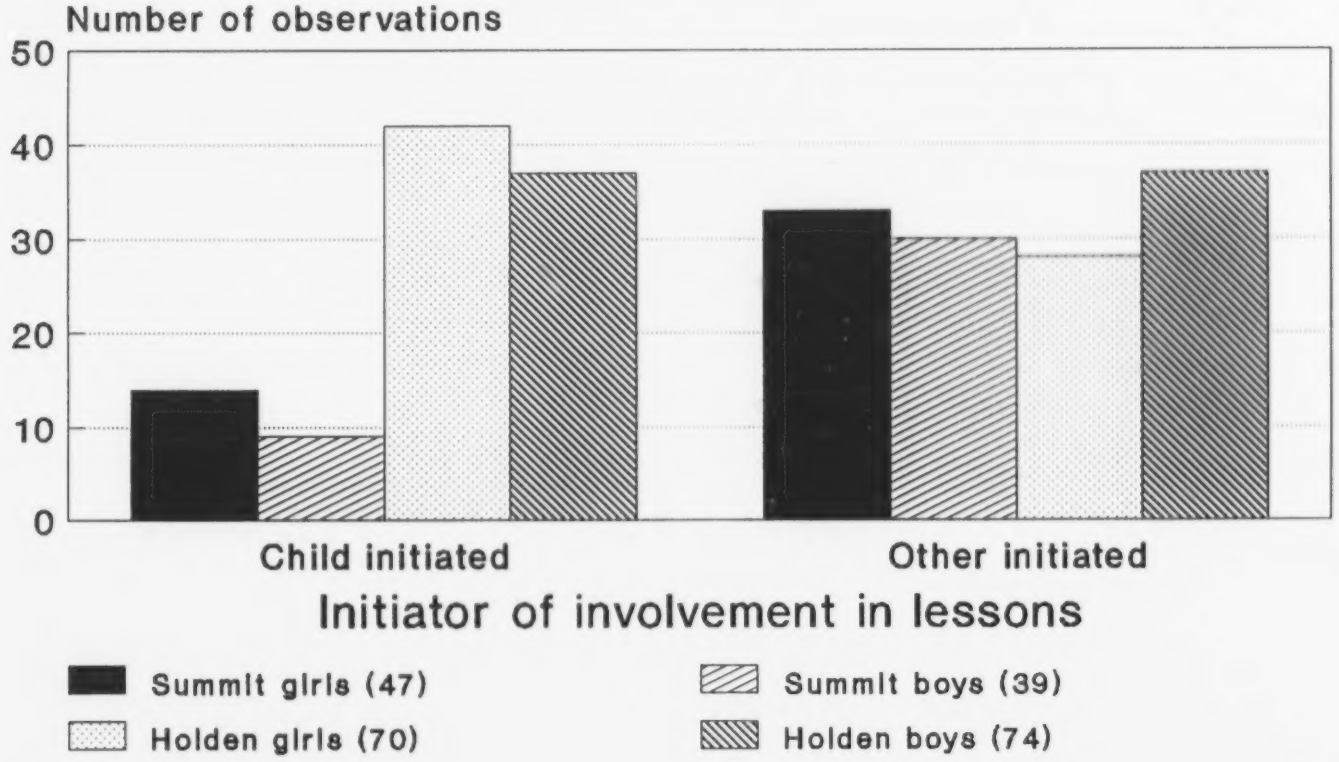
Total Ns = all lessons (by group)

4: Who Initiated the Lessons?
By Community and Gender



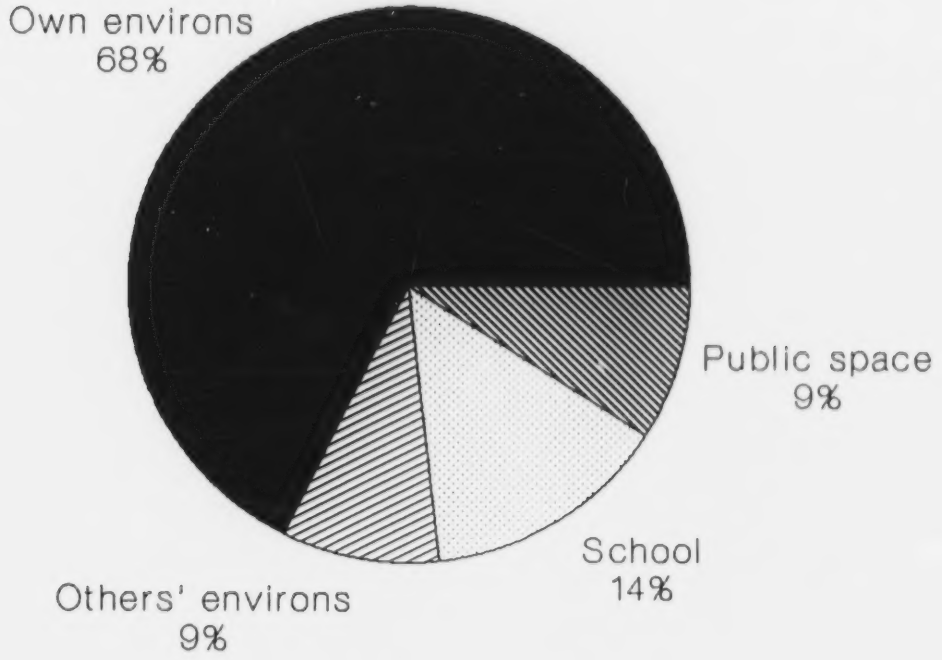
Total Ns = all lessons (by group)

5: Who Initiated Involvement?
By Community and Gender



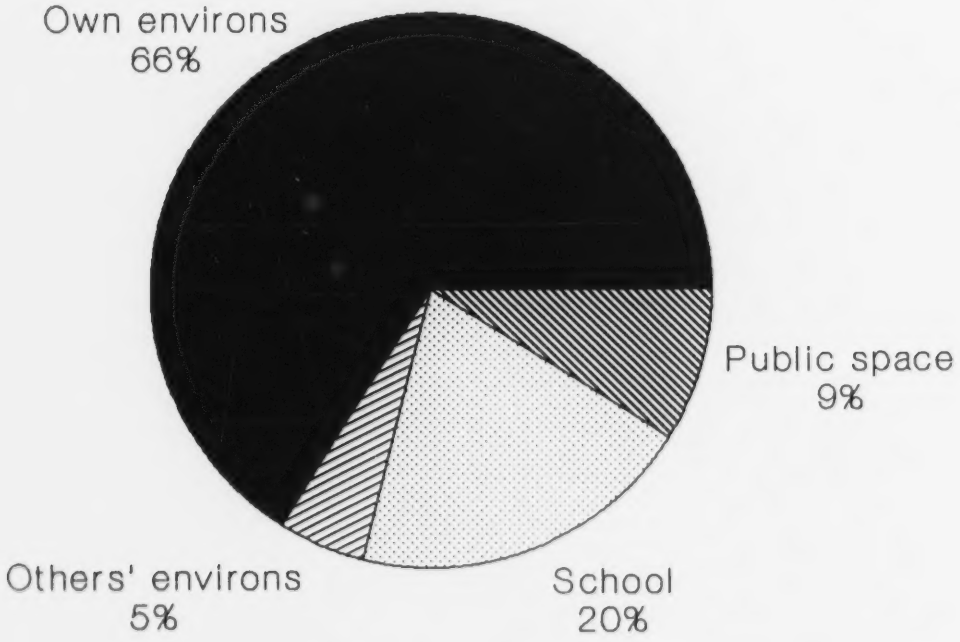
Total Ns = all lessons (by group)

6: Locations Observed
Summit



percentages of 1,617 observations

7: Locations Observed
Holden



percentages of 1,967 observations

8: Type of Lesson by Location

Holden

	Academic	Interpersonal	Skill	Total	%
Own environs	23	30	33	86	60.6
Others' environs	2	2	2	6	4.2
School	15	16	9	40	28.2
Public space	1	2	7	10	7.0
				142	

Summit

	Academic	Interpersonal	Skill	Total	%
Own environs	3	26	22	51	63.7
Others' environs	1	4	1	6	7.5
School	7	11	0	18	22.5
Public space	0	4	1	5	6.3
				80	

9: Partner in Lessons at Home

Holden

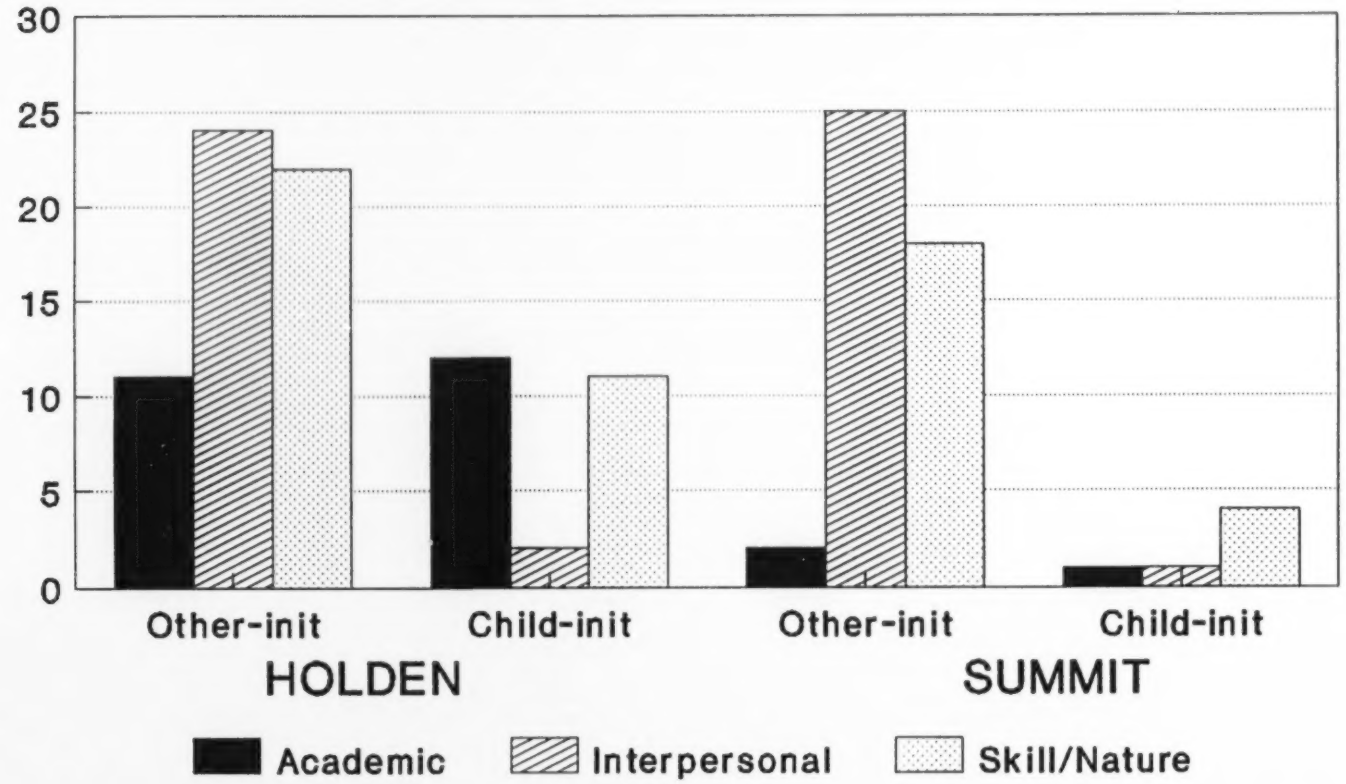
	Academic	Interpersonal	Skill	Total	%
Father	1	2	2	5	5.8
Mother	19	18	23	60	69.8
Other adult	1	3	1	5	5.8
Youth	2	3	5	10	11.6
Peer		4	1	5	5.8
				85	

Summit

	Academic	Interpersonal	Skill	Total	%
Father		3	5	8	15.7
Mother	2	16	13	31	60.8
Other adult			2	2	3.9
Youth	1	4	1	6	11.8
Peer		3	1	4	7.8
				51	

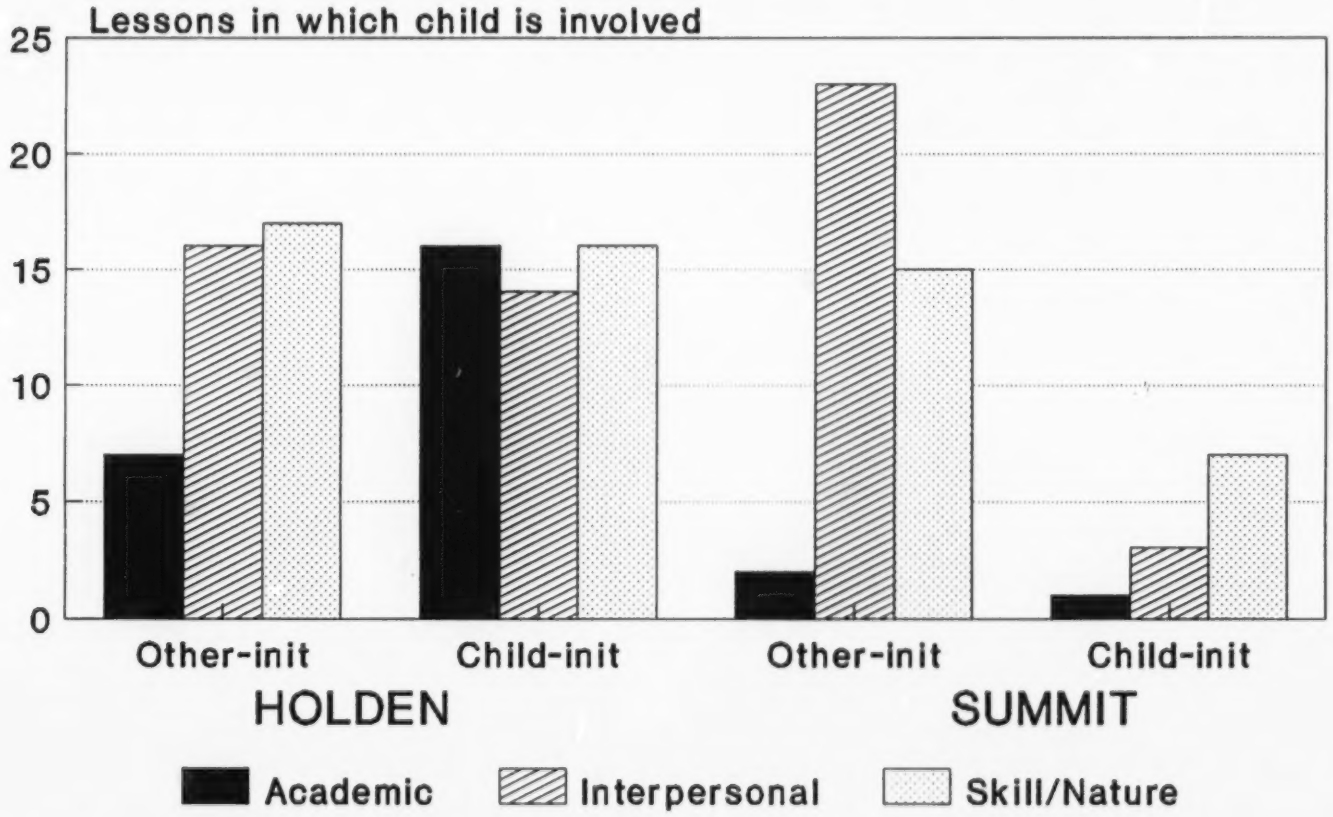
10: Initiation of Lessons at Home

Type of Lesson by Community



Total Ns = lessons at home (by group)

11: Initiation of Involvement in Lesson at Home - Lesson by Community



Total Ns • lessons at home (by group)